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FINDING THE GOLDEN STATE KILLER AND CRIME SOLVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Wednesday, June 12, 2019
1:15 – 2:15 p.m.
Grand Ballroom
Galt House Hotel
Louisville, Kentucky

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**Printed by: Evolution Creative Solutions
7107 Shona Drive
Cincinnati, Ohio 45237**

Kentucky Bar Association

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THE PRESENTERS

Paul Haynes

Los Angeles, California



PAUL HAYNES is a Los Angeles-based writer. Known as "The Kid" in Michelle McNamara's *I'LL BE GONE IN THE DARK*, Mr. Haynes worked closely with Michelle as her researcher and investigative partner, and helped finish the book after her death. Originally from South Florida, Mr. Haynes' work with Michelle was the culmination of a decade-long obsession with unsolved serial cases, and the Golden State Killer in particular. He has also worked as a film critic, video editor, and screenwriter, and is currently co-executive producing the HBO docuseries of Michelle's book.



Billy Jensen

Los Angeles, California

BILLY JENSEN was a true crime journalist focused squarely on unsolved murders and missing persons. But after 17 years of writing hundreds of stories with no endings, he was fed up and decided to try and solve the murders and find the missing himself. And it worked. Combining the shoe leather investigative tenacity and skills he learned reporting crime with radical techniques honed from his day job as a digital executive, Mr. Jensen has solved more than a half dozen homicides and helped find seven missing persons. Law enforcement agencies now reach out to Jensen to help in cases that have them stumped, using him as a "consulting detective." The New York native has written crime stories for *Rolling Stone*, *Los Angeles Magazine*, *Boston Magazine*, and *Miami New Times*, was managing editor of the *Long Island Press* and a crime stringer for the *New York Times*. After his friend Michelle McNamara suddenly passed away, he and her researcher Paul Haynes helped finish her book "I'll Be Gone in the Dark" about the hunt for the Golden State Killer. Mr. Jensen's own true crime memoir, *Chase Darkness with Me*, was released in the spring of 2019.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF A KILLER

Michelle McNamara

February 27, 2013

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<https://www.lamag.com/longform/in-the-footsteps-of-a-killer/>

Fifty rapes. Ten murders. Two identities. One man. From 1976 to 1986, one of the most violent serial criminals in American history terrorized communities throughout California.

He was little known, never caught, and might still be out there. Now a determined investigator, a retired detective, and a group of online obsessives are on the hunt to track him down



ON THE RUN The Golden State Killer's telltale imprint: a size 9 tennis shoe

[1] MISSING LINKS

ON A SLEEPLESS NIGHT LAST JULY – one of dozens I've powered through during the months I've spent tracking him down – I Googled a description of a pair of cuff links he stole in the midst of a home invasion in Stockton in September 1977. At that time the Golden State Killer, as I've recently come to call him, hadn't yet graduated to murder. He was a serial rapist who was attacking women in their bedrooms from Sacramento to San Ramon, targeting those who lived in quiet upper-middle-class suburban neighborhoods. He was young – anywhere from 18 to 30 – Caucasian, and athletic, capable of eluding capture by jumping roofs and vaulting tall fences. He frequently wore a ski mask. He had either blue or hazel eyes and, some victims reported, a high-pitched voice. He would rant to his victims about needing money, but he frequently ignored cash, even when it was right in front of him.

But he didn't leave empty-handed. He took items of personal value from those he had violated: engraved wedding bands, driver's licenses, souvenir coins. The cuff links he stole in Stockton were a slightly unusual 1950s style and monogrammed with the first initial N. From my research I knew that boys' names beginning with this letter were rare, appearing only once in the top 100 names of the 1930s and '40s, when the original owner was likely born. The cuff links were a family heirloom belonging to the victim's husband; they were distinct looking.

I hit the return key on my laptop, expecting nothing. Then a jolt of recognition: There they were, a single image out of the hundreds loading on my laptop screen, the same style as sketched out in the police file I had acquired, with the same initial. They were going for \$8

at a vintage store in a small town in Oregon. I bought them immediately, paying \$40 for overnight delivery, and went to wake my husband.

"I think I found him," I said, a little punchy from lack of sleep. My husband, a professional comedian, didn't have to ask who "him" was. While we live in Los Feliz with our young daughter, my online life has been taken over by unsolved murders – and with maybe someday solving one of them – on a Web site I launched in 2006 called True Crime Diary. By day I'm a 42-year-old stay-at-home mom with a sensible haircut and Goldfish crackers lining my purse. In the evening, however, I'm something of a DIY detective. I delve into cold cases by scouring the Internet for any digital crumbs authorities may have overlooked, then share my theories with the 8,000 or so mystery buffs who visit my blog regularly. When my family goes to sleep, I start clicking, combing through digitized phone books, school yearbooks, and Google Earth views of crime scenes: a bottomless pit of potential leads for the laptop investigator who now exists in the virtual world.

The Golden State Killer, though, has consumed me the most. In addition to 50 sexual assaults in Northern California, he was responsible for ten sadistic murders in Southern California. Here was a case that spanned a decade and ultimately changed DNA law in the state. Neither the Zodiac Killer, who terrorized San Francisco in the late 1960s and early '70s, nor the Night Stalker, who had Southern Californians locking their windows in the '80s, was as active. Yet the Golden State Killer has little recognition; he didn't even have a catchy name until I coined one. His capture was too low to detect on any law enforcement agency's list of priorities. If this coldest of cases is to be cracked, it may well be due to the work of citizen sleuths like me (and a handful of homicide detectives) who analyze and theorize, hoping to unearth that one clue that turns all the dead ends into a trail – the one detail that will bring us face-to-face with the psychopath who has occupied so many of our waking hours and our dreams.

[2] THE M.O.

On October 1, 1979, on Queen Ann Lane in Goleta, a town near Santa Barbara, a terrified woman lay facedown in her living room, her wrists tied behind her back, her feet bound at the ankles. Her tennis shorts had been thrown over her head as a blindfold. She could hear him rummaging around in the kitchen. It was 2:20 a.m.

"I'll kill 'em, I'll kill 'em, I'll kill 'em," he chanted to himself – like, as an investigator would later put it, "a guy pumping himself up for an athletic endeavor."

The woman managed to remove the bindings from her feet and escaped screaming out the front door; in the chaos her live-in boyfriend, bound in the bedroom, was able to hop into the backyard and roll behind an orange tree, just missing the frantic, searching beam of the intruder's flashlight. A witness caught a glimpse of the suspect fleeing the scene: a lean man in a Pendleton shirt pedaling furiously away on a stolen silver Nishiki ten-speed. After that botched attack, none of his victims would survive to describe him. Almost three months later, on the morning of December 30, a half mile south of where the October attack took place, Santa Barbara sheriff's detectives responded to a call at the condominium of Dr. Robert Offerman. A woman out front was crying. "There are two people dead inside," she said.

The bodies were in the bedroom. Offerman's girlfriend, psychologist Debra Alexandria Manning, 35, lay on the right side of the waterbed, nude and bound. Offerman, a 44-year-

old osteopath, was on his knees on the floor; in his left hand he clutched a length of white three-strand nylon cord. The killer's plan seemed to have gone awry. Offerman had been able to break free from his bindings, raising the possibility that the killer might have ordered Manning to tie him up and that she had bound him loosely on purpose.

As detectives processed the crime scene, they stepped around a turkey carcass wrapped in cellophane that had been discarded on the patio. At some point, probably before he shot his victims through the heart and the back of the head, the killer had opened the refrigerator and helped himself to Offerman's leftover Christmas dinner.

The forensics team noted what appeared to be the intruder's signatures: the nylon twine, the pry marks on the doors and windows, the tennis shoe impressions. Everything matched the pattern of a man who had become known as the East Area Rapist, or EAR, a cat burglar whose middle-of-the-night assaults paralyzed Sacramento and Contra Costa counties starting in 1976 and ending after a thwarted attack on July 6, 1979. To zero in on a victim he often entered the home beforehand when no one was there, learning the layout, studying family pictures, and memorizing names. Victims received hang-up or disturbing phone calls before and after they were attacked. He disabled porch lights and unlocked windows. He emptied bullets from guns. He hid shoelaces or rope under cushions to use as ligatures. These maneuvers gave him a crucial advantage because when you woke from a deep sleep to the blinding flashlight and ski-masked presence, he was always a stranger to you, but you were not to him.



BEHIND THE MASK A sketch of the attacker in the 1970s, one of the few derived from rape victims' descriptions

The Northern California detectives on the EAR Task Force had theorized he would snake his way south. They worried he was escalating in violence. "That's him, I know it," thought Contra Costa investigator Larry Crompton when he learned of the Goleta murders. The Santa Barbara County sheriff's office felt differently and was reluctant to make the connection, whether out of disbelief or fear of bad publicity.

Three months after the Goleta murders, in March 1980, there was another double murder, this time in Ventura, of Charlene and Lyman Smith. Keith and Patrice Harrington, who were living in a gated community in Dana Point, were the next victims. Then came Manuela Witthuhn in Irvine. The scenes echoed each other: The females were all slender beauties whose hands were bound behind their backs, and circling each single-story

house were tiny star impressions from a pair of size 9 Adidas. The rapist had evolved into a serial killer, and the transformation only seemed to hone his self-discipline. Murder seemed to satiate him more than rape did, and longer periods of time passed between the crimes. Whereas before he seemed to bask in the notoriety, now he took pains to hide any hint of a link between the murders, removing ligatures from the scene, even staging one murder to look like a robbery.

By May 5, 1986, when 18-year-old Janelle Cruz was discovered raped and bludgeoned in her home in Irvine, only the killer and a few alert investigators like Crompton knew that the East Area Rapist was now the worst unidentified violent serial offender in modern American history.

After Cruz's murder, the Golden State Killer stopped. Perhaps his impulses had subsided. Perhaps, like everyone else in America, he'd followed the August 1985 capture of Richard Ramirez, the Satan worshipper known as the Night Stalker, and the case building up against this psychopath who, like himself, had bound, raped, and killed his way (13 murders in all) across California. The name this unknown perpetrator was given by law enforcement – the Original Night Stalker, or ONS – was derived from the nom de crime of Ramirez. And Crompton found himself among an ever-dwindling cadre of detectives pushing against a growing indifference, dedicating himself to a case that, for all practical purposes, had been abandoned.

[3] MALIGNANT OBSESSION

The woman who sits across from me in a small office in east Sacramento is a stranger. But you wouldn't have known that from the conversational shorthand we use from the moment we meet, our message board equivalent of Klingon.

"Dog beating robbery in '74?" I ask.

The woman, I'll call her the Social Worker, reties her thick ponytail and takes a sip from a can of Rockstar. She's in her late fifties, with large, penetrating green eyes and a smoky voice. She had greeted me in the parking lot by waving her arms wildly overhead. I liked her right away.

"I don't believe it's related," she says.

The '74 robbery in Rancho Cordova we're parsing was the kind of recently uncovered incident that the two of us had connected through on the serial killer message board. There is only one book about this killer, and it's what sparked my interest in the case when I read it two years ago. *Sudden Terror* was self-published in 2010 by the now-retired detective Larry Crompton. But I was familiar with such details as the robbery – and thousands of others – because of the A&E Cold Case Files message board. Yes, the basic-cable channel behind addictive reality-TV series like *Intervention* and *Hoarders* hosts a board for the true-crime reenactment series that was canceled in 2006 (and that I've never actually watched) and lives on as a hidden hive of digital crime solving. After reading Crompton's book one night, I Googled "East Area Rapist" and "Original Night Stalker" to see what else was out there about him, and the board popped up. I started off as a lurker, an outsider gleaning the insights of others who were obsessed. Before I knew it, I had read all of the 20,000 posts about the Golden State Killer (known as EAR/ONS on the site), spending hours there while my daughter was taking a nap and after my husband

went to bed. Given that serial killers are the subjects of a half dozen prime-time shows currently on television, I am obviously not alone.

I found a spectrum of personality types on the message board, from paranoid cranks to the raw, curious insomniacs driven by the same compulsion to piece together the puzzle as I am. Of the dozens of people who regularly visited, a devoted few stood out. The Social Worker (like many on the board, she prefers anonymity) operates as a kind of gatekeeper between Sacramento investigators and the board. This irks some posters, who accuse her of hinting at confidential information and then shutting down when asked to share. That she occasionally has new information is not in dispute. A few months after I began corresponding with her in April 2011, the Social Worker posted a drawing of a decal she said was seen on a suspicious vehicle near the scene of one of the Sacramento rapes. “It is possibly from a naval base on North Island,” she posted, “but unconfirmed and has no record. Is it familiar to anyone on the board? Hoping we may find where it is from.”

Now, a year after I first e-mailed the Social Worker, she is giving me a tour of the killer’s early stalking grounds. She navigates from the passenger side as I steer my rental car around the modest ranch houses abutting Sacramento’s old Mather Air Force Base, where he was active in the mid-1970s (it has since been converted into one of the city’s airports). She points out a nearby duplex where he raped victim number 24, a 17-year-old girl whose boyfriend was tied to the bed facedown, a metal lid and salt shaker placed on his back. If the items fell off, the rapist had threatened, he would come back and shoot him in the head.

Afterward the Social Worker guides me through the leafy neighborhoods of Arden-Arcade and Del Dayo, which the rapist also turned into crime scenes. These areas of east Sacramento he preyed on were not built for excitement. I counted an entire block of unbroken beige. The tamped-down cautiousness belies the terrible things that happened here. We turn onto Malaga Way, where on August 29, 1976, the clanging of her wind chimes and the strong smell of aftershave awakened a 12-year-old girl. A masked man stood at her bedroom window, prying away the upper left corner of the screen with a knife.



THE INVESTIGATOR Cold case specialist Larry Pool has been tracking the Golden State Killer’s crimes for two decades

“I lived here through the height of it,” the Social Worker says. She was a young mom then and recalls how the terror reached a debilitating peak around rape number 15. An uneasy memory from that period had nagged at her, and she reached out to a detective with the Sacramento Sheriff’s Department to see whether it was all in her mind. It wasn’t. The

detective confirmed that before the rapist's penchant for phoning victims had been publicized, the Social Worker had filed three police reports about an obscene caller, a "stalker" who, she said, "knew everything about me." She now believes the caller was him. "It's a really dark place, thinking about this stuff," she says while we're parked on the side of a roundabout, the American River flashing blue in the distance. The Social Worker confides that she felt "spiritually" called upon to help solve the case. "But I've learned you've got to watch out, to take care of yourself. Or it can consume you."

Can? Haven't we spent the last four hours – to say nothing of the last few years – consumed? In the car we swapped leads we've pursued. Already I'd dedicated an entire afternoon to tracking down every detail I could about a member of the 1972 Rio Americano High School water polo team, because in the yearbook photo he appeared lean and to have big calves, maybe the same big calves that the Golden State Killer's earlier victims had identified. The Social Worker once dined with someone she regarded as a potential suspect and then bagged his water bottle to test his DNA.

My own obsession with unsolved murders began on the evening of August 1, 1984, when a neighbor of mine in Oak Park, Illinois, where I grew up, was found murdered. We knew Kathleen Lombardo's family from our parish church. She was out for a jog when she was dragged into an alley. Neighbors reported seeing a man in a yellow tank top and headband watching Kathleen intently as she jogged. He cut her throat.

Several days after the killing, without telling anyone, I walked the block and a half north from our house to the spot where Kathleen had been attacked. I was 14, a cheerleader in Tretorn sneakers whose crime experience began and ended with Nancy Drew. On the ground I saw pieces of Kathleen's shattered Walkman. I picked them up. Kathleen Lombardo's murderer was never caught.

What gripped me that summer before I started high school wasn't fear or titillation but the specter of that question mark where the killer's face should be. When you commit murder and remain anonymous, your identity is a wound that lingers on the victim, the neighborhood, and in the worst cases, a nation. For digital sleuths, a killer who remains a question mark holds more menace than a Charles Manson or a Richard Ramirez. However twisted the grins of those killers, however wild the eyes, we can at least stare solidly at them, knowing that evil has a shape and an expression and can be locked behind bars. Until we put a face on a psychopath like the Golden State Killer, he will continue to hold sway over us – he will remain a powerful cipher who triumphs by being just out of reach.

[4] WHAT'S IN A NAME?

One of the uncomfortable truths about tracking and catching serial killers is, marketing matters. Ever since Jack the Ripper terrorized the slums of 19th-century London, serial killers who thrive on public reaction seem to instinctively know this and sometimes devise their own monikers. The Zodiac Killer, for instance, announced himself in a letter to the editor in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1969. David Berkowitz, the Yonkers, New York, postal clerk who murdered six people in their cars at random, came up with his tabloid sobriquet, Son of Sam, in a letter to the New York Police Department, claiming a dog by that name had urged him to kill. Cousins Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono, together known as the Hillside Strangler, chillingly described where they disposed of bodies and the method in which they dispatched ten young women around northeast Los Angeles

over a four-month period in the late '70s. Most recently *L.A. Weekly* crime writer Christine Pelisek used the name Grim Sleeper to describe a man who is believed to be responsible for at least ten murders in South L.A., starting in 1985 with a 13-year break between the final two murders. (A suspect has been arrested, and his list of victims is far from settled.) A handle that perfectly crystallizes the creepiness, menace, and horror of the perpetrator and what he or she has done can't help but captivate the public's imagination. A grisly pathological signature left at crime scenes will have the same effect. Either will put added pressure on politicians and police departments to apprehend the killer as long as he remains at large, even if he retires from murder and mayhem. And it will linger with the popular culture long after the perpetrator has been caught, with tales retold in best-selling books and feature films. But he benefited from not having a name people knew.

The moniker law enforcement bestowed on the Golden State Killer – EAR/ONS – was an unwieldy and forgettable attempt to merge two identities. Sacramento police came up with “East Area Rapist” because the early sexual assaults began in the eastern parts of the city. During a meeting in the late '90s of several Southern California law enforcement agencies, Larry Pool, an investigator with the Orange County Sheriff's Department, and other authorities would realize that this man's m.o. predated that of Ramirez. The unidentified serial killer they sought was the “Original Night Stalker,” a name that stuck by default, much to Pool's chagrin. When in 2001, DNA tests showed that the East Area Rapist and the Original Night Stalker were the same person, the killer became EAR/ONS for short.

Google “Son of Sam” and you'll get more than a million hits. On Amazon you can take your pick of eight books about Berkowitz. By comparison, a Google search of EAR/ONS yields barely more than 11,000 mentions, and one of the top hits on Amazon is Jean Campbell's *Getting Started Stringing Beads*, which happens to contain a mention of clip-on earrings. On the same page is Crompton's sole text on the killer, which I've found to be an unvarnished, unfiltered avalanche of case details, full of 1970s political incorrectness and strangely moving in its depiction of one matter-of-fact cop's rueful regret.

I came up with the name “Golden State Killer” for this article because his numerous crimes spanned California, confounding authorities throughout several jurisdictions. Also, at the very least, this ID is more memorable.

I've studied the Golden State Killer's face, drawn from composite sketches made decades ago, more than my own husband's. There is no single accurate rendering of him, but a few features – his lantern jaw and prominent nose – are consistent. His hair, hanging over his ears to his collar, seems so '70s that I can almost hear Lynyrd Skynyrd's “What's Your Name.” I know his blood type (A positive, nonsecretor). I know his penis size (conspicuously small). I know that he was built like a runner or a swimmer.

He liked to “bomb” a neighborhood, as one investigator put it, sometimes targeting houses just yards from one another. He was nervous and fidgety yet brazen. Once, he walked away from a crime scene without his pants on, and when a dog chased him into a backyard, he waited patiently until he was sure the dog wouldn't bite and then reentered the house. He paused in the middle of one rape to go to the kitchen and eat apple pie. Sometimes after he violated someone, the bound, blindfolded victim would later recall hearing him in another room of the house, sobbing. Once, a victim remembered hearing

him cry out over and over again: Mummy. Mummy. Mummy. Another woman said he told her that news reports of his crimes “scares my mommy.”

He relished keeping his victims off balance well after the initial attack. He issued incriminating taunts (“I’ll kill you like I did some people in Bakersfield”) and allegedly sent a typewritten poem titled “Excitement’s Crave” to Sacramento news outlets, comparing himself to Jesse James and Son of Sam. He harassed his victims by phone. One brief, whispery threat was recorded by authorities through a tapped phone line: “I’m going to kill you.”

[5] A COLD CASE HEATS UP

After 48 hours of anticipation, I received the package containing the cuff links. I ripped open the box, tore through the bubble wrap, and examined the sealed Ziploc bag with the cuff links inside. I suddenly felt anxious. If a speck of biological evidence clung to these shiny gold pieces, I risked destroying what might be key evidence with one fingerprint. I didn’t open the bag.

The best thing to do, I knew, was to turn the cuff links over to an authority on the killer. I already had an interview set up with Larry Pool, the Orange County sheriff’s detective who was widely recognized as the “face of the case.” I decided if I felt the interview was going well, I’d hand over the plastic bag with the cuff links.

The problem was, of the handful of officials who remained focused on the Golden State Killer, Pool intimidated me the most. He’d been described as “inaccessible” and “a little remote.” I knew he’d been working on the case for the past 15 years. He’d been instrumental, along with Golden State victim Keith Harrington’s attorney brother, Bruce, in getting Proposition 69 passed – the DNA Fingerprint, Unsolved Crime and Innocence Protection Act, which in 2004 established an all-felon DNA database in California. Thanks to their efforts, the California Department of Justice now has the second-largest working DNA data bank in the country.

Pool and Bruce Harrington felt that by expanding the DNA database they’d surely net Golden State. The disappointment, it was suggested to me, was sharp. I imagined Pool as a steely, impassive cop locked away in a dimly lit room, the walls plastered with composites of the killer.

Instead a pleasant, somewhat formal 51-year-old man in wire-rim glasses and a red-checked shirt greets me in the small lobby of the FBI’s Orange County Regional Computer Forensics Laboratory (Pool is still the Orange County Sheriff’s Department’s case agent for the killer but works in computer forensics now). We sit across from each other at a long table inside a glass-paneled conference room. He is the duty officer for the lab today, and when colleagues occasionally poke their heads in, he responds with a clipped “copy that.”

I find him to be a thoughtful, measured speaker, the kind of person whose stoic exterior masks a certain generosity and a belief that hours spent listening – even to a civilian crime enthusiast – may be time well spent. “When I took this on, I was still relatively fresh, if you will,” says Pool. “I got excited about people, like a ski-mask rapist in prison who matched the description. In the first year, five or six times I got really excited. In the second year, four or five times.” But now, after investigating, by his count, 8,000 suspects and spending

years of performing triage on urgent tips from fellow police and a public who are convinced their suspect is the Original Night Stalker, Pool's attitude is muted and deliberate. When he comes across a particularly promising suspect, his curt response is always "Gotta eliminate him."

Even the composite sketch that hangs above Pool's desk is matter-of-fact: It shows the suspect in a ski mask. "Is it of any value?" Pool says. "No. But we know he looked like that." A new FBI profile is being generated, he tells me, and it will diverge from earlier theories about the killer. Pool's theories have similarly evolved. In part from talking to criminal profilers who "understand how these people are wired better than I do," Pool no longer views the Golden State Killer as a sort of superhero villain, a ballsy egomaniacal force in peak physical condition. "He's a small guy, diminished, and he does everything he can to get the upper hand at the beginning and to keep it," he says. "To intimidate and terrorize people because he doesn't want to confront them physically."

The new FBI profile is part of the investigation's reboot. In addition, Pool tells me the FBI has provided its assessment on some crucial issues. The agency agrees with what many of the task force investigators have long contended – that the suspect likely got his start two years earlier and 200 miles farther south than was first believed, in Visalia, a farming town in the Central Valley. Beginning in April 1974, Visalia experienced an unusual series of ransackings in four residential neighborhoods. The Visalia Ransacker preferred personal effects like piggy banks, photographs, and wedding rings, leaving behind more valuable items.



SENSELESS DEATHS From top: Keith and Patrice Harrington of Dana Point; Irvine resident Janelle Cruz, who was slain at age 18

Then on September 11, 1975, the 16-year-old daughter of Claude Snelling, a journalism professor at College of the Sequoias, was awakened by a man's hand covering her nose and mouth. "You're coming with me. Don't scream or I'll stab you," the ski-masked intruder whispered. He led her out the back door. Snelling, alerted by the noise, ran onto the patio. "Hey, what are you doing?" he shouted. "Where are you taking my daughter?"

The intruder didn't reply. He raised a .38-caliber handgun and shot Snelling in the chest, mortally wounding him, and then kicked the daughter three times in the face before running away. He was a white male, about five feet ten, with "angry" eyes, the daughter reported to police.

A stolen gun strongly pointed to the Visalia Ransacker. On December 10 detective Bill McGowen startled the Ransacker outside a house he'd targeted three times before, and a chase ensued. When McGowen fired a warning shot, the ski-masked suspect raised his hands in surrender.

"Hey, OK, don't hurt me," he said in a squeaky voice, reaching with one hand to peel off his mask. But it was a mime trick; with his other hand he fired a shot at McGowen. The bullet shattered McGowen's flashlight, sending shards into his eyes. The Ransacker jumped a fence and escaped. The plundering in Visalia stopped. Months later the East Area Rapist attacks in Sacramento began.

Pool tells me the FBI ran an actuarial study and concluded last year that there's an 85 percent chance the Golden State Killer is still alive.

I peg Pool as someone who prioritizes procedure and would accuse me of overstepping with my impulsive cuff links purchase. But I take a chance at the end of our conversation and reach into my backpack for the Ziploc bag. I nudge the cuff links across the conference table. He takes the bag and examines it carefully.

"For me?" he asks, stone faced.

"Yes," I say and begin to explain why I bought them.

I catch the slightest hint of a smile. "You've made me very happy," he says. "In fact, I think I love you."

A few days later Pool ascertains that the cuff links are not the same pair after all. But it doesn't matter, as he has a more promising lead, one in which he needs the public's help. It turns out that having such a far-reaching, complicated case has its rewards: The many jurisdictions means there are multiple property rooms to go back to in search of old evidence, to dig through for clues stored years ago and forgotten.

That's exactly what Paul Holes, the chief of the Contra Costa Crime Lab who helped develop the DNA profile, was looking for in his property room, and he found it in a sealed bag marked "collected at railroad tracks" – a clue overlooked and ignored. After all, it was a parking ticket that eventually revealed Berkowitz was the Son of Sam.

In his office Pool taps at his computer keyboard, calling up an image that can't load fast enough. It shocks me how quickly I lean in, primed to memorize everything I see. I realize

how hungry I am for new information about the bogeyman who's wormed his way into every corridor of my brain.

A faded, hand-drawn map pops up on the screen. Hand drawn, the police believe, by the Golden State Killer.

[6] BACK TO THE BOARD

One of the more compelling online sleuths I've met through the message board is a 30-year-old guy from South Florida whom I call the Kid. He has a bachelor's degree in multimedia studies and, he's hinted, a somewhat troubled home life. He holds what he vaguely describes as "a McJob," but the message board is a full-time endeavor. Details matter to him. He's smart, meticulous, and occasionally brusque. He's also, in my opinion, the case's greatest amateur hope. He first got my attention when he made the point that if you trace the linear distance from the Irvine pizza place – where shortly before her murder Janelle Cruz got a cashier job – to her house, and then from her house to Manuela Witthuhn's house (the Golden State Killer's other Irvine victim), you get an almost perfect equilateral triangle. It's not a large area, covering a couple of miles at most. Somewhere in that triangle, the Kid theorized, lived the killer.

"You're one of my favorite posters," I wrote the Kid one day, and a correspondence began. Like Deadheads trading concert tapes, he sends me a PDF of the 1983 Orange County telephone directory; I send him a criminal record he's looking for. We run down information on each other's favorite suspects.

"Too tall," I write. The killer was between five feet eight and five feet ten.

"Hirsute," the Kid comments. (The killer was not.)

We both agree geography is key. There are only so many white males born between, say, 1943 and 1959 who lived or worked in Sacramento, Santa Barbara County, and Orange County from 1976 to 1986. Of those locations, most followers of the case agree that Sacramento, where the killer officially started his crime spree (unless it was indeed Visalia), is the ripest area to mine for clues, beginning with the rapes.

I message the Kid about a possible suspect I'd uncovered. The man has an address history in Sacramento, Goleta, and Orange County. I had found a photo of his car that he'd posted online. The vanity license plate interested me – it alluded to building model aircraft, a hobby that some had speculated the killer might be into. Now in his fifties, the man would be about the right age. I all but had him in handcuffs.

"Haven't done anything with that name in a while," the Kid writes back politely. Included in his message is the image of a dour nerd in a sweater vest, my suspect's sophomore-year picture, which the Kid already had on file. "Not in my top tier," he writes. I am chastened – and impressed.

While I share the Kid's passion, I don't have his skills. He's an exceptional data miner. By his calculation he's spent 4,000 hours scouring everything from old directories to yearbooks to online data aggregators in order to compile what he calls "the Master List." When I first saw the list, its thoroughness left me agape. It is a 118-page document with some 2,000 names and information, including dates of birth, address histories, criminal

records, and even photos when available. There's an index, footnotes. There are notations under some names ("dedicated cycling advocate") that seem nonsensical unless you know, as we do, far too much about a possibly dead serial killer who was last active when Ronald Reagan was president.



THE RETIRED DETECTIVE Larry Crompton, in his Oregon home, can't let go of the man he failed to capture

The truth is, even the Kid is a little fuzzy on his motivation. "It's the unidentified nature of EAR that intrigues me more than anything else," he writes me. "For no particular noble or tidy reason, I want to know who EAR/ONS is."

"At some point I'll have to walk away from all this and move on with my life," he says. Which is why he opts for the monthly billing cycle rather than the annual service on Ancestry.com.

"I hope to hell I'm not still doing this a year from now," he had written me – a year and a half ago.

Not everyone admires the board sleuths or their efforts. One agitator came on recently to fume about what he characterized as wanna-be cops with a twisted, pathetic obsession. He accused the board of being populated by untrained meddlers with an unhealthy interest in rape and murder.

"WALTER MITTY DETECTIVE," he wrote.

By then I was convinced one of the Mittys was probably going to solve this thing.

[7] THE NOTEBOOK

Trails. building. A lake. It looks like a rough map of a planned community; in fact, that's what Pool and other investigators believe it is.

The notebook pages were collected at the scene of a rape in Danville, in Contra Costa County, in December 1978 by a now-deceased criminalist. The Golden State Killer, who was then known as the East Area Rapist, was definitely the offender. Shoe prints and two

independent bloodhounds established his exit route, a trail that led from the victim's house to some nearby railroad tracks.

The paperwork, which is referred to as "the homework evidence," was collected at the location where the trail stopped abruptly, indicating the rapist got into a vehicle. Investigators believe he dropped the pages unintentionally, perhaps while rooting around in a bag or opening his car door. They are on standard college-rule paper, three-hole punch, ripped from a notebook but with the spring binding intact. The first page appears to be a homework assignment on General Custer ("General George Armstrong Custer, a man well admired but a man hated very much by many who served him").

The second page has the feeling of a journal entry or therapy exercise, an angry, resentful screed about the author's memories of sixth grade. "Mad is the word," it begins. The author recalls how he got in trouble in school and his teacher made him write sentences over and over again, a humiliating experience. "I never hated anyone as much as I did him," the author writes of the unnamed teacher.

The third page is the hand-drawn map. Investigators examined the unusual markings on the land area and figured out they represented a change of grade and elevation for drainage purposes. Roofing is also an apparent interest: The two symbols on the bottom right are standard indicators showing left- and right-side elevations of a house, suggesting rooflines.

Further analysis led investigators to believe the mapmaker possibly dabbled in landscape architecture, civil engineering, or land-use planning. They've tried unsuccessfully to find the area depicted on the map. Pool believes the drawing resembles Golden State's preferred attack neighborhood, and that it's a fantasy.

On the back of the map, amid a series of doodles and girls' names, is the word punishment scrawled hard in black pen with the letter p written backward. Right above the word punishment, in faint handwriting, are the words "Come from Snelling." At least that's what Pool believes. It's the last name of the man murdered in Visalia.

Pool and fellow investigator Holes are allowing me to publish this piece of evidence for the first time, to accompany this article, in the hopes that it will jog someone's memory – not unlike what happened when a man recognized his brother's extreme ideology in a manifesto released to the media by police, which led authorities to the Unabomber.

I need to locate the area represented by the map, analyze the handwriting, and research the references it contains. On the night I review the notebook, I have two thoughts: One, what a promising lead this is for the case. And two, is this ever going to end?

[8] NEW WORLD

I've always been a restless, jittery sleeper, prone to waking with a start. One night I'd fallen asleep after reading the Original Night Stalker police files. The bedroom door creaked open. I heard footsteps in the dark. Without thinking, I grabbed the lamp on my nightstand, leaped from bed, and lunged at the figure in the room. It was my husband. When we discussed the incident later, what was curious to us both is that I didn't scream. In fact, I didn't even swing the lamp. I just asked a question: "Who are you?"

It was the only question I had anymore.

The world has changed for the Golden State Killer in ways he could never have predicted. We know from the tennis shoe impressions under windows and how, for example, he knew exactly when one victim would be home alone even though her husband had just changed shifts the day before, that he was a voyeur at a time when physically standing in front of a window was the only way to stalk. But if he's alive, he's growing old in a world where every day more and more windows are opening around him – on computers, on smart phones, in DNA labs.

He couldn't have predicted that one day we'd be able to identify people by a single skin cell or that a quarter of a century after his last known crime, a stranger in Florida – who's never been to Sacramento and wasn't born when the rapes began – could painstakingly cycle through a dozen public records aggregators, narrowing down the possibilities, zeroing in on his name.

The Kid's list reminded me of something he and I had connected over from the beginning. What drew us to this mystery, we both agreed, was that it can be solved. Technology has made that possible. I may not have what it takes to do so, but someone out there does.

I wonder at times if I need to step back. It's not easy. Several months after our first meeting, Pool tells me he's decided to retire from the sheriff's department and pursue a career in the private sector. He will remain on the Golden State Killer investigation, however, describing the case as "my great unfinished business." He's not the only veteran cop who refuses to give up. During a family trip to Portland, I took a train trip an hour south to meet Larry Crompton, the man whose book sparked my interest in this case, at a museum café in Salem. He hasn't actively worked on the investigation since the '70s, and he retired from the Contra Costa Sheriff's Department in 1998. But the toll the experience took on his life is still evident. "I was supposed to catch him. And I didn't," he says. "I have to live with that."

I think of the tag line from the movie *Zodiac*: "There's more than one way to lose your life to a killer."

Crompton is dressed in a dark blue cotton shirt and has the stiff, rugged posture of a retired cop turned rancher. He often pauses to find the kindest way to say something. He expended great effort trying to warn his colleagues about the East Area Rapist: that he was going to return and attack the other teenage girl in Walnut Creek (he did), that he'd moved to Southern California and started killing couples (did that, too).

In return for his efforts Crompton endured frustration and heartbreak, though he's too polite to say that directly. He recalls the damaged lives of the victims after the attacks, how many of the husbands were riddled with guilt that they didn't do more to fight back. The two of us sit long enough for a distracted waitress to serve me five iced tea refills. At one point Crompton turns his head and mutters to no one in particular, "I just want to catch him before I die."

"If he were caught and you got to ask him one question," I ask, "what would it be?"

He thinks for a beat and smiles mischievously. "Remember me?"

Then, becoming serious, he says, "What'd I miss?"

[9] STOLEN LIVES

The police files depict in clinical prose the ordinariness of the victims' lives in the moments before the attacks – a single mom watching the last minutes of *The Tonight Show* in bed, a teenager sticking a frozen pizza in the oven and setting the timer.

The Golden State Killer was a destroyer of all that was familiar and comforting to his victims. Sex was secondary to instilling terror. It's no accident that one of his signature threats was "I'll be gone in the dark." He wasn't a mere rapist. He was a phantom who kept his victims perpetually frightened with the threat that he lurked, ligatures in hand, around every corner of their unassuming tract houses.

One victim never went back inside the house where the crime took place. Another rape survivor, victim No. 5, told me she came to despise her house. She had to stop skiing because of her attacker's ski mask. "And his black tennis shoes," she said. "I'll never forget them." A former nurse, she now volunteers as a rape crisis counselor. "I've forgiven him. He was such a heavy burden on me for so long."

Mad appeared to be his favorite word. Is it still? Or is he no longer the masked intruder working the bedroom screen with a screwdriver but the father in the button-down cardigan checking the locks on his back door?

In "Excitement's Crave," the poem he allegedly wrote, the Golden State Killer alludes to going underground. "Sacramento should make an offer. / To make a movie of my life / That will pay for my planned exile." My bet is he's enjoying a comfortable exile, leading an unremarkable life among the unsuspecting. A suburban dad passing unnoticed behind the hedge wall.

The other night when I couldn't sleep again, I opened my laptop, positioning it so as not to wake my husband. I began studying Flickr, scrolling through Goleta Little League team photos from 1978. I couldn't pull myself away from studying the men in the back rows, the assistant coaches, the young dads, searching their faces for who among them might have been hiding in plain sight, for the everyman with a baseball cap and a twisted glint in his eye.

In the past, when people have asked whether it worries me that the killer may still be out there, I've waved dismissively, pointing out that he'd be much older now – 62, if I had to guess. "He can't hurt me," I say, not realizing that in every sleepless hour, in every minute spent hunting him and not cuddling my daughter, he already has.

